

Introduction

The John Locke portrayed in these pages is not the John Locke I thought I would find when I first embarked on this project. I initially believed that Locke was more or less straightforwardly a follower of Thomas Hobbes, despite the care he takes to appear not to be. That is, I took it that he bases his moral argument squarely on individual self-interest, on individual right derived from self-interest, rather than law and duty based on the common interest. I presumed that this was the foundation of a wholly secular edifice, that Locke's appeals to divine sanction for his system were disingenuous, a rhetorical necessity for one who wanted to advance a new philosophy of government that in fact undermined the old, theologically based theories.

Locke certainly is more Hobbesian than many have recognized, and does go to some lengths to conceal that kinship. Self-interest plays a pivotal role in his moral and political philosophy, and in that respect Locke is closer to Hobbes than to Thomas Aquinas or Richard Hooker, for example. But, over the course of my studies of Locke, I have been led to the conclusion that individual rights are not the bedrock or foundation of his philosophy. Rather, the foundation is natural law, natural law moreover that exists, and can only exist, as divine command. Strangely, perhaps, I have come to these conclusions partly by taking seriously Locke's devotion to modern science, and his self-appointed role as the moral philosopher of the scientific movement.

There is no need to explain the importance of John Locke, or the importance of studying and understanding him, in our age. Locke is perhaps the principal founder of liberalism – the philosophy of individual liberty, religious toleration, and limited government – on which all free government rests today. What needs explaining is the publication of another book on Locke, one of the most thoroughly studied philosophers of all time. The literature on Locke is truly vast, and continually growing. Any new treatment of Locke must bear the burden of

demonstrating that it can add something novel and significant to this growing mountain of verbiage. My opening statement was the beginning of such a demonstration. In what follows here, I will outline the basic argument of this book, by way of justifying the time that readers might devote to it.

It has long been appreciated that Locke was an avid follower of, and advocate for, the new natural science. The profound mark that that science made on Locke's own work has not, I believe, been sufficiently traced. The new science had been launched by Francis Bacon early in Locke's century, was a significant intellectual force in Locke's own day, and became absolutely hegemonic with the work of Isaac Newton toward the end of Locke's life. Locke knew, and had some correspondence with, Newton, but he was particularly close to Robert Boyle, one of the major scientific *virtuosi* of his own generation. All three were members of the Royal Society, dedicated to advancing the new science. Boyle's atomic or "corpuscular" theory has an explicit presence in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, but the influence of the new science on that work goes much deeper. Since the *Essay* is Locke's foundational work of philosophy, including moral philosophy, this profoundly affects every other aspect of Locke's thought. My first claim to novelty in this book is to argue for the influence of modern science on Locke's philosophy, and to explore the ways this influence is felt not only in Locke's epistemology, but in his moral and political philosophy as well. In order to perform this task properly, I have found it necessary to provide a brief sketch of previous philosophic and scientific thought, from Plato and Aristotle, to medieval Scholastics and nominalists, to the first fathers of modern science. Only against this backdrop does the full meaning of important portions of Locke's argument come into view. This is the project of Chapter 1. My aim here is not to provide complete or novel interpretations of the authors under discussion, but to describe their thought in ways that will illuminate Locke's writings.

One feature of Locke's *Essay* in particular puzzled me when I first began to study it closely: Why does the normally dispassionate Locke display such vituperative animosity toward Scholasticism, which, we presume in retrospect, was in his day merely the dying remnant of a medieval school of thought? Locke's assault begins before the work itself, in the "Epistle to the Reader." Locke there blasts the "learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible terms," terms

which have “so long passed for mysteries of science,” but are nothing but “the covers of ignorance.”¹ He tells us that the first task of the *Essay* is “to break in upon the sanctuary of vanity and ignorance,” and clear away the “rubbish” therein that opposes the advancement of true learning (xvii, xvi).

Scholasticism, the purveyor of these unintelligible terms and rubbish, was a philosophical (and theological) school rooted ultimately in Aristotle, but modified in many ways from the Aristotelian original. The vehemence of Locke’s opposition to it shows not only that Scholasticism of some form was very much alive in Locke’s day, but that he takes it to be profoundly antithetical to his own view, and to the foundations of modern science as he sees them. It is my contention that we can properly understand Locke’s philosophical foundations only by seeing the specific ways he takes them to be incompatible with the teaching of Scholasticism, or the ways in which his approach is a reaction against Scholasticism. This in turn requires us to gain some understanding of Scholasticism, particularly as it existed in Locke’s day. A good part of the first chapter of this book is devoted to exploring the roots and development of Scholasticism, with special attention to those aspects of it that Locke takes to be incompatible with his own philosophy and with modern science.

Locke’s attacks give us glimpses of his opponent, but he never pauses to outline the Scholastic argument in any detail. Fortunately, his friend and ally, Robert Boyle, is more forthcoming. Boyle wrote numerous polemics against the “Schools,” or the “Modern Aristotelians,” on behalf of the new science. I have found Boyle’s works invaluable in uncovering the intellectual foil to Locke’s philosophy: Scholasticism as it existed in Locke’s day. This Scholasticism differed from medieval Scholasticism – and *a fortiori* from Aristotle – in some respects that are very relevant to Locke’s and Boyle’s opposition. But since all Scholasticism descended from Aristotle, and maintained throughout its history the key features of Aristotelian cosmology and moral theory, I have also found it necessary to go back to Aristotle to fill out the portrait. Scholasticism, even in Locke’s day, shared with Aristotle the view that the world is naturally divided into kinds or “species.” Those species,

¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), pp. xvi–xvii. Where possible, citations to this work will be given in the text, by book, chapter, and paragraph number.

moreover, are accounted for by the existence of immaterial “forms,” and brought into being (in part) by formal causes. Horses or trees are brought into being with the guidance of the forms of “horse” and “tree,” for (the argument goes), their being as horses and trees cannot be fully accounted for by material alone. And so too with the other beings: the immaterial forms collectively constitute the *template* for the ordered world we perceive, ordered into species or kinds. In its fundamentals, Aristotle adopted this theory from Plato. Scholasticism in turn adopted these fundamentals, only stipulating that God was the creator of the world and of the forms. This addition may not have altered the theory fundamentally from a philosophic (or scientific) point of view, but it greatly complicated the task of anyone undertaking to oppose it in Locke’s day.

True science, on the Aristotelian and Scholastic view of things, consists of knowledge not of particular things – individual horses or trees – but of the forms. Particulars are fleeting, while the forms are permanent, and “truth” can pertain only to the permanent. The project of science then becomes the pursuit of the forms. Since the forms can be grasped only by intellect, this science cannot be fundamentally empirical, even if it begins with empirical facts. It must be the province of philosophers who deal with the intelligible and non-empirical. In practice, however, by the lights of Locke and Boyle, it authorized learned doctors, in the name of “science,” to wrangle endlessly over the natures of the invisible forms, deploying unintelligible jargon, all but losing touch with empirical reality itself. In its Scholastic form, it also authorized them to brand anyone challenging this system as an atheist. This is what Locke and Boyle see as the massive obstacle to the pursuit of knowledge in their day.

The new science, as Locke, Boyle, and their colleagues understand it, finds the visible world to consist only of matter and material causes. In its militant opposition to Scholasticism, this science banishes all immaterial or “occult” causes from nature, for the admission of any such causes might provide an opening to the return of the unintelligible jargon. This caused some awkwardness when Newton proposed his theory of gravitation, for gravitation very much seems to be an invisible, non-material, cause. Leibniz, for one, charged Newton with inviting a return to the “Kingdom of Darkness” with such a theory. Locke accepted the theory, but confessed (in the polemics surrounding the *Essay*) that its nature was baffling.

Locke is much more forthcoming in the *Essay* about the nature of *species*, another key problem for the new science. Explaining the existence of species or kinds of things in nature was the great strength of the old theory – perhaps even its *raison d'être*. The signature problem of the anti-Aristotelians then is this: once we do away with formal causes and reduce all to matter and motion, how do we explain species, the fact that nature seems to be divided into regular kinds of things? Locke was not the first defender of the new science to wrestle with this problem, but one of the first to tackle it at a genuinely philosophical level. Without mincing words, he takes the position that *species do not exist*. But this is an assertion that can easily be misunderstood. Locke does not mean that there is no order or regularity in nature – this would make science of any kind impossible. What he means is that species have no existence *as species* – they are not immaterial forms separate from the particulars, as Aristotle and the Scholastics argued. The only things that *exist*, according to Locke, are particulars. Universals (such as “horse” or “tree”) are pure products of the mind. In more traditional terms, Locke is a “nominalist.” We divide the world into kinds of things for our own convenience; the precise divisions could perhaps be done quite differently. If our interests or purposes shift, our species divisions could shift with them. All the while, we would be employing divisions wholly suitable to our purposes, since our fundamental purpose is useful knowledge, not the contemplation of nature’s ghostly template. The one thing we must never do is mistake our species concepts for true or objective entities.

Whether this is a fully consistent view of nature, or adequate to the epistemological purposes to which Locke and the modern science that follows him put it, is one issue we will have to confront in the pages that follow. One reason I have pursued this theme with such care is that we devotees of the ancients are sometimes too inclined, I fear, to dismiss the modern assault on them as ill-grounded or unnecessary, to believe that we can return to them without much ado.

On Locke’s immediate horizon, meanwhile, a more pressing problem looms. It is one thing to deny species as a scientific or epistemological matter. It is an entirely different thing to follow the implications of this denial into the realm of morality. “Species,” in the Aristotelian and Scholastic theory, grounded not only knowledge, but morality as well. The *form* of each type of thing was also conceived of as its *perfection*. The purpose of each individual in a species was to fulfill its

proper form so far as possible. An adult horse is a more perfect, more completely realized, expression of the form than a foal. This is the “teleology” of the Aristotelian and the Scholastic theory. In the case of human beings and the human form, the perfection in question was also conceived of as normative or moral. It is our purpose or our duty as individual humans to attain to the perfection implicit in the human form.

In destroying the foundations of Scholasticism, Locke simultaneously destroys the old basis for morality. He could not avoid destroying the old basis for morality. This explains much of the controversy aroused by his argument in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. By his theory, our species concept “man” is as much a mental construct, is just as arbitrary, as every other such concept. The precise way in which we define “man” reflects the state of our knowledge of ourselves, as well as the purposes for which we are using it at the moment. Locke does not shy away from this argument, or its consequences. “Man” is a principal example in the *Essay* of an arbitrary or wholly mental species construct.

While clearing away the rubbish that lies in the way to the advancement of science, then, Locke creates for himself an additional, monumental task, the task of finding some new and fundamentally different basis for morality. Locke believes he has found such a basis, and he presents it in some detail in the *Essay*. His novel moral theory is the principal subject of the second chapter of this book. The theory revolves around something Locke calls “mixed modes,” a category of concepts that according to Locke includes all our moral ideas. The theory of mixed modes has raised questions, if not outright consternation, from Locke’s day to this. To begin with, Locke insists that mixed modes are mental constructs, and like our species concepts, they are creations of our own, not products of nature. Locke emphasizes the point: mixed modes are “arbitrary” creations, more arbitrary in fact than our species concepts, referring to nothing that exists in nature (*Essay* 2.31.3). The consternation arises from the fact that Locke simultaneously claims that he is in this way grounding morality more solidly than it has been grounded before. Indeed, morality can now become a “demonstrative science” for the first time, Locke tells us. In the *Essay* itself, Locke’s moral argument rests on an “eternal law and nature of things” (2.21.56). And of course, he is known today as a champion of absolute, non-arbitrary moral standards, such as individual rights and

natural law. These standards are capable of holding human beings, and governments, to account.

Among the greatest puzzles of Locke interpretation are, how Locke understands “mixed modes” to be a solid grounding for morality, and how it relates to the morality he champions in works such as the *Second Treatise of Government*. The theory of mixed modes can best be understood, I believe, as a modified version of a theory proposed by Samuel Pufendorf. Pufendorf, a German philosopher of Locke’s generation, argued that all moral concepts were creations of intellect, which he dubbed “moral modes.” These modes do not inhere in any object; they are not inherent in nature at all, we might say. Rather, moral modes are imposed on nature by intelligent agents. Pufendorf instances property, which he takes to be a creation of human agreement. To designate something as “my property” refers to no quality of the object itself; if I transfer ownership, nothing in the object changes. We have created the institution of property, and imposed or superimposed it on certain objects. One great advantage of this approach, Pufendorf says, is that it allows morality to attain to certainty, to become the subject of rational demonstration. The reason is precisely the unreal character of moral modes. The fact that morality deals entirely with ideas, mental constructions, allows it to become a true demonstrative science, like mathematics.

Locke is not a follower of Pufendorf in every respect – it suffices to mention the matter of property – but his treatment of the “mixed modes” of morality agrees with Pufendorf on all the other points mentioned, including the analogy to mathematics and the consequent promise of demonstrative certainty (*Essay* 4.4.6–7). Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy offered the possibility of certainty, but it could come only from a direct intellectual grasp of forms. The new science cuts off that avenue. The new science is empirical, and empirically rooted knowledge, Locke asserts, can never attain to certainty. The high degree of probability it can attain to is enough, in his view, to sustain the project of modern, technological science. It is not enough, however, to ground morality, making Pufendorf’s new approach to morals a godsend.

If morality is no longer inherent in nature, part of the structure of the world as it were, the proposal that it is rooted in pure mental constructs seems an elegant way of grounding it anew. It has the obvious problem, though, that free mental constructs, “arbitrary” mental

constructs as Locke designates them, would seem to support only a completely relativistic morality, that is, no morality at all in the traditional sense. Pufendorf solves this problem in perhaps the only way it can be solved – by having recourse to God. If morality consists of modes imposed on nature by intelligence, all morality takes the form of command or law. The only intelligence capable of imposing such a law on nature as a whole is God. Pufendorf continues to speak of “natural law,” but it no longer means a law inherent in nature, as it formerly did. In reality, natural law is divine law.

Again, Locke follows Pufendorf in every one of these claims. As I mentioned at the outset, this was not the conclusion I expected to reach when I first undertook this study of Locke. I presumed that Locke’s references to divine legislation were rhetorical cover for a thoroughly secular moral theory. This presumption was based mostly on readings of the *Second Treatise of Government*, which makes minimal, and seemingly superfluous, appeals to a divine warrant for justice. In the *Essay*, which develops much more thoroughly the basis of Locke’s moral philosophy, Locke makes explicit and unambiguous statements about the need for a divine legislator. I have found no way to discount or dismiss these statements. Moreover, the theory of mixed modes cannot ground any absolute or objective morality in the absence of such a legislator.

This has led me to a reinterpretation of the *Second Treatise*. That reinterpretation, and an exploration of the grounds of Locke’s political philosophy proper, is the subject of Chapter 3. Interpreters have long argued about the relationship between the *Essay* and Locke’s other works, particularly the *Second Treatise of Government*. Some have argued that the *Essay* and the *Second Treatise* are incompatible, since, to begin with, the *Essay* makes moral concepts “arbitrary,” while the *Second Treatise* relies on natural law. I believe this contradiction may be resolved in the manner just stated, but there are other tensions or apparent tensions between the works. While the *Second Treatise* makes individual right a focal point of morality, the *Essay* says virtually nothing about the existence of individual rights, presenting instead a morality of duty under law. The relation between the two works on this point is complex, even paradoxical. Though the *Essay* speaks almost entirely of duty, its morality is in some respects less demanding than the rights argument of the *Second Treatise*. The *Essay* lays down the fundamental principle that rational consciousness is necessarily

concerned with its own happiness. Any law laid upon such a creature must be compatible with its personal happiness, then, if compliance is to be reasonably expected. Accordingly, Locke asserts in the *Essay* that the moral law is the law that conduces to our happiness, and our fundamental duty is to pursue our own happiness properly. The rights argument of the *Second Treatise*, meanwhile, imposes on us other duties – at a minimum, the duty of respecting the rights of others. Such a duty seems difficult to reconcile with the argument of the *Essay*. For may not respecting the property and other rights of others occasionally require some sacrifice of my own interest and happiness?

If the duty of the *Essay* seems in this respect to be less demanding than the natural law of the *Second Treatise*, it seems more demanding in proposing a standard of rationality that we must live up to. It is our duty to exercise rational discernment in our pursuit of happiness, pursuing it only after having gone through a “fair examination” concerning where our true happiness lies (*Essay* 2.21.48). This indeed is a “perfection of our nature” (*ibid.*). The *Essay* gives us numerous examples of individuals who have fallen short, who have failed to perform this moral duty. This would seem necessarily to create a difference of rank between those who perform the duty adequately and those who do not, calling into question Locke’s fundamental principle of human equality. Though the language of rational perfection is less prominent in the *Second Treatise*, the same problem is visible there. Those who violate the law of nature, even in the state of nature, Locke notoriously says, may be treated like irrational beasts (§§10–11). Similarly, children have no rights until they attain the use of rationality (§§55, 57, 58). It would seem that equality must be *earned*, once again threatening the principle of human equality. Since equality is a fundamental principle not only for Locke, but also for the liberal culture he helped to create and which we inhabit, it is important that we sort this out if we can.

Apart from all other difficulties, the rights morality of the *Second Treatise* and the duty morality of the *Essay* would seem to be philosophically very different, perhaps incompatible, moral approaches. They would indeed be incompatible, I believe, if individual right were the true root of morality in the *Second Treatise*. I have come to the conclusion, however, that it is not, that even in the *Second Treatise*, natural law is prior to individual natural right. The fundamental principle of natural law, as Locke says numerous times in that work, is “the

preservation of all mankind.” The priority of this principle is clearest in the chapter on “paternal power” and the family, and in parallel passages in the *First Treatise of Government*. Parental duties spring not from any prior right, of the child or anyone else, but from natural-law duty rooted in the preservation of mankind. On closer inspection, I argue, even the famous property right of the *Second Treatise*, seemingly the most individualistic and interest-based of moral principles, proves to be derivative from the higher-level, “communal” principle of the preservation of mankind.

Yet rights are clearly important to Locke’s political philosophy. If they are merely derivative from a communal principle, are they not precarious, subject to suspension whenever the common good might require it? I compare Locke’s doctrine of property to those of some of his predecessors – Thomas Aquinas, Hugo Grotius, and Samuel Pufendorf – to pinpoint Locke’s novelty. That novelty lies partly in the much higher status Locke accords to the property right, and to individual right generally. Even though property, and the other rights, are ultimately grounded in the general good, and even though this does restrict the rights in some important ways, Locke is at pains to demonstrate that natural law, and its divine legislator, mandate much higher respect for individual rights than Grotius or Pufendorf, for example, thought. Although those two pioneered a “new natural law” that brought individual rights much more to the fore, they allowed the rights to be overridden in certain circumstances, countenancing slavery and absolutism, for example. Locke disallowed both of these, and made certain key rights inalienable. For that reason, he is properly seen as the apostle of individual right in the modern sense, even if that right is not the bedrock of his moral philosophy.

The view that individual right, rather than natural law, is the bedrock of Locke’s moral argument seems to be most strongly supported by Locke’s approach in the *Second Treatise of Government*. Locke’s political philosophy in particular, or his philosophy of government, does indeed give individual right pride of place. We must understand, though, that this reflects the limited purposes he assigns to government – the protection of property, broadly construed as “life, liberty and estate.” The limited nature of government dictates that it operate within a limited moral horizon. Reading the *Second Treatise of Government* in isolation can give a false impression of Locke’s moral philosophy, of his own moral horizon. It is unfortunate, in a sense, that